

London 2012: recent trends in the international competitiveness of national elite sport systems

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Elite sport systems can be analysed from the perspective of inputs, throughputs and outputs, respectively. They need inputs in the form of population and talent base, infrastructure, funding and other resources. Throughputs in the form of efforts to achieve organizational and managerial efficiency determine how inputs are transformed into outputs. National success in international sport competitions is not the only measure of the system output but it is most often given priority in policy discourse. In this analysis, results in Olympic Summer Games are seen to represent international competitiveness of national elite sport systems.

The aim of this study is to contribute new knowledge about the development of elite sport systems, in general (following up on studies such as Houlihan & Green, 2008), and about the international competitiveness of elite sport systems, in particular.

The paper analyses recent trends in the international competitiveness of different elite sport systems on the basis of a detailed analysis of the results from the London 2012 Olympics. Two indicators will be used: medal points (no. 1: 5 points, no. 2: 3 points, no. 3: 2 points) and top-8 points (no. 1: 8 points, no. 2: 7 points; no. 8: 1 points). Total medal points and top-8 points for all disciplines in London 2012 will be calculated and compared with similar figures from earlier Olympic Summer Games (since 1952) to identify how results from London 2012 fit with long-term results patterns. This will follow up on earlier studies such as Stamm & Lamprecht (2000)

In addition, the results from the recent Olympic Games will be compared with 'simulated Olympic Games' (i.e., results from world championships and equivalent competitions and rankings for all Olympic disciplines) for every year in-between the Olympics since 1996. This analysis is based on a unique existing result data base. It is the aim of this comparison to evaluate to what extent Olympic results represent long-term trends or rather short-term coincidence and fluctuation. More specifically, it is analysed how the results in London 2012 fit with short-term result patterns.

The expected results section include a focus on the following major trends: China is expected to continue its rise and possibly surpass the United States not only as far as gold medals is concerned as in Beijing 2008 but also as measured by medal points and top-8 points. The position of Russia will be stable. Great Britain will continue its steady

rise and take full advantage of hosting the Games. Australia will continue its decline and Germany will remain under par. France has the broadest elite base in terms of competitiveness in the largest number of sports but is still not able to translate this into overall results that are at level with Great Britain and Germany. The recent resurgence of Japan will show in its best results since the Tokyo Olympics. Other interesting expected trends are the strong improvement of countries such as New Zealand, Azerbaijan and Brazil, the equally strong decline of Cuba and the continued nadir of previously predominant countries such as Bulgaria and Romania. Also the trends for the Nordic countries and the emerging economic super power India will be covered.

Furthermore, an attempt will be made to provide preliminary explanations of the recent trends. Ultimately, the international competitiveness of national elite sport systems depends on the inputs and throughputs of elite sport systems. However, it may also depend on measurement error (Strom & Nielsen, 2010a) and various idiosyncratic events and unique factors. First, the potential and actual problems with the applied indicator for international competitiveness will be outlined. Second, trends in results will be analysed from the perspective of developments of various input measures such as economic growth and elite sport funding. Third, changes as far as throughput is concerned are more difficult to integrate. Efficiency in the use of available resources can to some extent be seen as a derived measure (in principle, output per unit of input). However, this provides no insight in the actual throughput. The evidence of such mechanisms is at present rather limited, fragmented and unsystematic. Reference to such evidence (e.g. De Bosscher, 2007, and Storm & Nielsen 2010b) will be included in the analysis to the extent that this is possible.

References:

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